DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 431 691 SO 030 872

AUTHOR Thelin, Bengt
TITLE Fostered to Internationalism and Peace: Biographical Notes on UN General Secretary Dag Hammarskjold. Peace Education Miniprints No. 97.
INSTITUTION School of Education, Malmo (Sweden).
ISSN ISSN-1101-6418
PUB DATE 1998-12-00
NOTE 17p.; Revised version of a paper presented at the International Peace Research Association Conference, Peace History Commission (Durban, South Africa, June 1998).
AVAILABLE FROM Lund University, Malmo School of Education, Box 23501, S-200-45 Malmo, Sweden.
PUB TYPE Information Analyses (070) -- Opinion Papers (120) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Cultural Background; Foreign Countries; *International Cooperation; *International Organizations; *International Relations; *Peace; *Profiles
IDENTIFIERS Biodata; *Hammarskjold (Dag); Peace Education; *United Nations

ABSTRACT

This paper presents some biographical glimpses of Dag Hammarskjold's childhood and youth. It is a period of the life of the late United Nations (UN) Secretary General (1905-1961) that has been dealt with very little by his biographers. Hammarskjold's private archives at the Royal Library in Stockholm are now available for research. These sources lead to two observations: (1) his family background, the intellectual, cultural, and international environment in which he grew up and lived were important preconditions for his later career; and (2) they deepen and confirm the knowledge of his intellectual capacity and moral integrity, showing that these characteristics, as well as his religious and responsible nature, matured early in his life. Contains 6 notes and references. (BT)

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No. 97
December 1998

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Biographical Notes on UN General Secretary Dag Hammarskjöld

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Biographical Notes on UN General Secretary Dag Hammarskjöld

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In this paper some biographical glimpses of Dag Hammarskjöld's childhood and youth are presented. It is a period of the life of the late UN Secretary General (1905–1961) that has been very little dealt with by his biographers. However, since some years his private archives at the Royal Library in Stockholm are available for research. These sources lead to two observations.

1. His family background, the intellectual, cultural and international environment in which he grew up and lived as young were important preconditions for his later career.
2. They deepen and confirm our knowledge of his intellectual capacity and moral integrity showing that these carachteristics as well as his religious and responsible nature, matured early in his life.

FOSTERED TO INTERNATIONALISM AND PEACE

Biographical Notes on UN General Secretary Dag Hammarskjöld

Bengt Thelin
Sommarvägen 24
S-183 60 Täby, Sweden

1. The Sources and the Aim of this Project

Although there are several biographies of Dag Hammarskjöld (1905–1961) and many essays, articles and special studies on different aspects of his time and his achievements as UN Secretary General, comparatively little has been written about the early period of his life, his first 25 years. (1)

Of course, in the period immediately after his death in 1961 and, a few years later, when his "Markings" was published, several obituaries and articles were written by friends and colleagues who had worked with him in his different positions and missions. In this material, usually written in Swedish, one can find – although relatively rarely – some notes on his childhood and school and student years. This material reflects the authors' personal memories and impressions of Hammarskjöld but is not, naturally, the fruit of any historical ambition or research. Nevertheless, it illustrates valuable fragments of his life story, including his early years. Furthermore, these authors are all unanimous in their opinion of his intellectual brilliance and moral integrity. This is also true of those who had been among his critics, due, for example, to his reserved nature and noli me tangere attitude.

I can see two reasons for this relative silence about the young Dag Hammarskjöld in the otherwise prolific literature about him. One is his own reticence about his private life, a well known fact which has also

been confirmed to me by some of his close friends, whom I have interviewed. (2) Another is the absence of historical primary source material with relevance to his early, private life. Now, nearly 40 years after his death, the situation has changed. Dag Hammarskjöld's exhaustive correspondence, in his role as UN Secretary General, with statesmen, politicians, authors, artists etc is available at the Royal Library in Stockholm. The archives consist of several hundreds of boxes. Historians, journalists and politicians now have contact with Mr Jack Zawistowski, B.A., the librarian in charge, to get information on papers of relevance for their own various subject areas and projects. (3) 70 boxes of this collection contain exclusively Dag Hammarskjöld's private letters and documents. As far as I have found this part of the archives has not yet – with one exception (4) – been used by any researchers. As for letters it consists of two groups. One, "the family letters", are letters to and from his parents and his three elder brothers and other relatives. They cover the years from his early childhood until his death. Another group is "the friends' letters". They are letters to and from some of his close friends during his student years at the University of Uppsala and later in his life. For the past two years, I have been concentrating my own research on this material, with the aim of writing a biography of the first 25 years of Dag Hammarskjöld's life. (5)

The purpose of this IPRA-paper is firstly, to give some brief glimpses of Dag Hammarskjöld's childhood and youth as illustrated by the "family and friends' letters" and thus hopefully to present a more detailed picture of the early period of his life than has hitherto been possible, secondly, to present some reflections on how this period is related to the last phase of his life as regards his general behaviour and attitudes, values and views. Or, to put it in other words: is there any relevance in my title Fostered to internationalism and peace?

2. Dag Hammarskjöld's Family Background

Dag Hammarskjöld grew up in an aristocratic, highly respected family. He was born in 1905 in Jönköping, a county town in the southern part of Sweden, where his father, Hjalmar Hammarskjöld, held the position of

President of the Court of Appeal.

Hjalmar Hammarskjöld was a well-known public figure who held many prestigious positions in Sweden and abroad. His speciality was International Law, and he served at the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague and later on at the League of Nations in Geneva. Another important appointment was his membership of the Swedish delegation which negotiated with Norway in 1905. The Norwegians wanted to leave the union with Sweden and gain full sovereignity. For some weeks there was very serious political tension between the two "brother" countries. A war was avoided and peace was assured due, to a large extent, to the ability of Hjalmar Hammarskjöld.

In 1907 Hjalmar Hammarskjöld was appointed governor of the prestigious county of Uppsala and the family went to live in the Uppsala castle, dating from the 16th century. While he was governor, Hjalmar Hammarskjöld continued his international commissions. After a government crisis in 1914, he accepted an assignment to form and lead a new government and was prime minister of Sweden for three years. He also had literary interests and qualifications and was elected to the Swedish Academy in 1918. Among its other duties the Academy nominates the Nobel Prize winner in literature every year. Hjalmar Hammarskjöld died in 1953 and was succeded on "chair 17" in the Academy by his son Dag.

During his lifetime Hjalmar Hammarskjöld had the reputation of being a severe person and a good but dominating pater familias. This is verified and illustrated in the family letters. His demands for discipline, industry and economy etc were hard – on both his wife and his sons. There are several passages in the letters where Agnes Hammarskjöld tries to mitigate his harshness and awkwardness, not only to members of the family but also to other people. She does it in a tender but straightforward way, and not without a good sense of humour. Her letters give a picture of this famous politician and high public official as a rather isolated person, who was not easily contended and who found fault easily. He prefers solitude, even vis à vis his own dear family, which is indicated by the fact that he spends a great part of his holidays alone and not with his wife and sons. The Swedish mountains, particularly an isolated hotel close to the Norwegian border called Storlien, seems to be among his favourite resorts. He dislikes parties and everyday, banal conversations.

Despite his need for solitude, he is very dependent on frequent contacts with the members of his family. He often asks for letters, blaming his wife and his sons for not being more enthusiastic correspondents, which sometimes creates a comic impression when one considers how often they, and first and foremost his wife, really wrote to him.

Dag's mother Agnes also came from a well-known family. Her father was Fridolf Almqvist, Director General of the National Prisons Board, known as a person with humanitarian interests who worked to mitigate the conditions of prisoners. His half-brother was Carl-Jonas Love Almqvist, one of the most famous authors of Sweden during the nineteenth century, an imaginative and many-sided talent but also a controversial person, who ended his life in exile. Agnes Hammarskjöld herself was evidently a highly intelligent person with a good school education. When she married Hjalmar Hammarskjöld, at that time professor of law in Uppsala, she gave up her own potential professional ambitions to play a lifelong role as a devoted wife and mother. She was a very warm and tender person with great empathy. There are lots of passages, for example in the friends' letters to Dag and in the many condolences he received when she died in 1940, which show how admired and loved she was by all the people she had met during her private and official life at the side of her husband. However, there are some sides of her life and character which obviously had a strong impact on all the family, and particularly on her youngest son and the development of his personality. These characteristics were not unknown by friends and relatives of the family and they are mentioned by some of those who have written about Dag Hammarskjöld. But the correspondence confirms them and reveals them more clearly.

The first is the fact that Agnes Hammarskjöld had very poor health, which often made her confined to her bed and for long periods forced her to stay at convalescent homes and hospitals. There is no reason to doubt that she really suffered from poor health, although she also seems to have been a little bit of a hypochondriac. Anyhow, her own and the other family members' anxiety for her health was more or less a permanent component of the Hammarskjöld family's life, and is very often reflected in her own letters and in the letters she received from her husband and her sons.

The second fact is her warm and fairly sentimental religiosity. The necessity to trust in God, never to forget daily prayers and always to strive to live in accordance with God's will are frequent topics in her letters. Thus regular morning and evening prayers were part of family life with Agnes Hammarskjöld as the driving influence. Her opinion on the Bible is probably rather uncomplicated and not much influenced by a modern historical view, which became more and more current during the first decades of this century and caused a lot of anxiety for many who held a traditional Christian belief. There are many passages in her letters which indicate that she regarded this life as no more than a preparation for a better world to come.

The third thing to say is that she tied her youngest son to herself in an almost unwholesome way. She had ardently desired that her fourth child would be a girl, something she doesn't hide in her letters. An indication of this is, by the way, that one of the four first names given to Dag was Agne, the masculine form of her own name Agnes. But her love for her youngest child grew stronger and stronger as the years went by in spite of the fact that he was not a girl. She declared both for her husband and for Dag that he was "her dearest possession in the world". She was also convinced, as early as in his teens, that Dag was heading for "something great" in the world.

The eldest son in the family was Bo, born in 1891 and the next one Åke, born in 1893. Both had extraordinarily rapid careers as senior public officials, Bo in Sweden and Åke following in his father's footsteps first in Geneva and then at The Permanent Court of Arbitration in the Hague. Bo survived his parents and his brothers and died in 1974, having retired many years earlier from his position as county governor in Nyköping. Åke died as early as 1937. A third brother, Sten, born in 1900, was less successful in his studies and in his career, partly due to poor physical health and obviously a slight depressive disposition. He died in 1972. All the family is buried in the family grave in Uppsala, which is still a place where many people go to pay their tribute to Dag Hammarskjöld's memory.

3. Schoolboy and Student

Dag Hammarskjöld reached intellectual maturity early. He got his first schooling from a female tutor in Uppsala together with some other children from well-known families. During the years his father was prime minister he attended a grammar school in Stockholm. In 1916, a few months before Hjalmar Hammarskjöld returned to his post as governor in Uppsala, Dag entered the old grammar school there. Like his father and his brothers Bo and Åke in the same school he obtained his school leaving certificate – Baccalaureate – at the age of 18 with very high marks in every subject except gymnastics, where he got a mediocre grade. This is a little surprising considering his great interest in outdoor life and hiking.

Directly after grammar school he started his university studies and only two years later he took his BA (fil kand) in Romance languages, Economics and Philosophy. Three years later, in 1928, he took a higher degree (fil lic) in economics and after another two years he completed his studies in the Faculty of Law with a degree in Law. That year, 1930, his father retired and his parents moved to Stockholm and with them Dag, who 25 years old was appointed secretary to a state commission on unemployment, which at that time in Sweden, as in so many other countries, was a serious problem. One section of the report of this commission was used by Dag Hammarskjöld as his dissertation in Economics and in 1933 he got his doctor's degree. He was also honored by being nominated docent, i.e. senior lecturer, although he never took up teaching. His extraordinarily rapid career as a student and a researcher had come to an end.

Dag Hammarskjöld seems to have lived a fairly isolated life both at school and at university. One reason for this was probably his own reserved and slightly shy disposition. Another was the high social position of his family, which was probably an obstacle for him in taking contacts and being together with boys and students from more ordinary homes. Also he sometimes suffered to some extent because of the fact that his father, with his conservative view and pretended sympathy for Germany during WWI, was a very unpopular person in some social groups. It is quite clear – and he has himself spoken about it – that he had to spend a

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lot of time with his mother during booth school terms and holidays, when he, like his brother Sten, joined her while she stayed at different resorts. When he grew up he evidently became more and more alone in this responsible role. His brothers Bo and Åke, who were more than ten years older than Dag, left home when Dag was fairly young. Sten, who was five years older, had his own interests and troubles although the relation between the two "small boys" as they were often called, was good and close.

It is also likely that Dag's intellectual superiority contributed to his sense of loneliness, as he obviously had some difficulties in finding pleasure in the enjoyments of his schoolmates of his own age.

At the university he took very little part in ordinary student life, with its parties and pleasures. I can see no traces of "Sturm und Drang" in his friends' letters and girls very seldom occur in them. When they do appear, they are treated in an indifferent and polished way, far from the wanton chat which can exist between young men. In Uppsala all the students at that time had to be registered as members of a "nation", i.e. a club or association for students from the same province of the country. Thus Dag belonged to "Upland's nation". There are very few traces of him in the records of this nation – with one exception. In 1929, when this "nation" celebrated its centenary, it was important for the members to find a distinguished chair person. Dag accepted the post as "First curator", i.e. chair person. But only for two months! The ordinary term of office was a whole academic year. However, in some letters there are indications that, during these months, he highly enjoyed the role of a happy student among other students.

In order not to go beyond the framework of this paper, I have to be brief about the friend's letters which I have referred to now and then above. The correspondence between Dag and a selected group of students started in the mid 20s and went on for the rest of their lives although, as time passed, they became more and more rare. The friends' letters are unlike his letters to his family. The family letters deal almost exclusively with superficial things, such as where he has been, what he is doing and what he plans to do, etc. His letters to his mother, especially, often have the character of "reports" in order to calm her and show her that he is thinking of her, wherever he is – which is probably true. It is in fact a

very considerate son whose voice is heard in these letters, which are often sent from his many hikes in the mountains. A question I have often put to myself is how, during his wanderings in the wilderness, he found the time to write and opportunities to mail all these "reports". His love of the Swedish countryside and particularly of the vast mountain areas in the northern part of Sweden, can be seen early in his life. Presumably this interest or need was an inheritance from his father, who, as mentioned above, had the same interests. It is also natural to suppose that Dag used these frequent journeys to the mountains to get some weeks for relaxing not only from his studies, later on from his work, but also from caring for his mother, a continual, practical problem. What I mean is that they also contain an element of escape, whether he was aware of this and admitted it to himself or not.

But now to his friends' letters. His nearest student friends was a group of three people of his own age. (6) They were all intellectually very well equipped and two of them became well known university professors while they were still relatively young. They formed an exclusive group who, besides their intensive studies, cultivated their intellectual and cultural interests, made Sunday excursions together and sometimes also took mountain trips together, discussing existential questions. They evidently influenced the development of each other's personalities in a fruitful way. In their correspondence later in life one can find several signs of retrospective "Uppsala nostalgia". As for their correspondence during the holidays, when they were in different places, one can discern various "themes", such as friendship, loneliness, death, religion and psychology. Literature and their reading experiences were frequently referred to and among "their" authors, besides some comtemporary Swedish poets and novelists, we find for instance Shakespeare, Conrad, Eliot, Lawrence and Freud, all thoroughly analysed and critizised. It is a little surprising that contemporary politics are not referred to in their correspondence. Summarising it, one can describe their correspondence as containing a good deal of self-centered introspection.

I have the impression that Dag Hammarskjöld was the central figure of the group, a possible mistake, however, as he is the central figure in my own research! It is also tempting to speculate whether some kind of sexual inclination or relationship existed between some of these friends. To get a

clear picture of this is, of course, almost impossible, though it would be of interest when we bear in mind the rumour later on that the Secretary General was homosexual. However, as far as I can find out, there is in the friends' letters no indication of this. I have found only one instance where one member of the group seems to have sensed some kind of erotic attraction vis à vis Dag. But there is no trace of a positive response of such an invitation, if it was one, from Dag. On the contrary, he is eager to reject, in his sophisticated and courteous way, every attempt to monopolise his friendship.

4. An Unchanged Picture

A central issue to consider when dealing with previously unknown biographical source material such as I have presented here is if and how it changes the traditional, established opinion of the person in question. Is it now time for a revised picture of the person Dag Hammarskjöld?

In the present context, I can only attempt to answer this question in a very summarizing way. Although lots of work still remains to be done, of analyses and a search for more sources and information, I think that the correct answer is no. The letters have given much more knowledge about him and his background, and about facts and circumstances of importance for understanding his growth and development than was previously possible. They likewise contain many details, some of them fairly piquant, which are an asset for a more popular and narrative biography. However, the main features of Dag Hammarskjöld's character are still there: a person of extraordinary and many-sided intellectual capacity, deeply religious with a spiritual root, who had moral integrity and a personal commitment, political clairvoyance and a great ability to act – but also a man involved in a more or less permanent moral and religious struggle within himself and his mission, with his loneliness, with his inclination for pride and arrogance, for impatience and intolerance. My sources do not rev[illegible] cracks in this summary description when I look at his later life u[illegible]s family and friends' letters as a kind of prognostic yardstick. I can discern a thread running through his life which is characterized by an impressive continuity and consistency. My research and my sources do

correct the picture. They confirm it.

5. Fostered to Internationalism and Peace

Is it possible to defend the title Fostered to internationalism and peace? – Of course, a clear intention or an awareness of that kind in a specific sense can hardly be found in this material. It is also unlikely that he in school was exposed to any kind of formal "peace education". Nevertheless it is obvious that both external and internal preconditions and ingredients for an international and peace oriented mission to a great extent existed in Dag Hammarskjöld's environment as a young man, as well as in his own emotional and intellectual abilities.

Here are some concrete facts. From his childhood he was conscious that there was a world outside Sweden, he was familiar with international issues, and realized that peace was the ultimate prerequisite for a dignified life for both individuals and states. He learned for instance how and when the League of Nations came into existence. He could hear about it at the dinner table when his father was at home, likewise from his brother Åke, who worked in Geneva for some years and then became Secretary General at the International Court in The Hague, which he visited together with his parents.

In his home and elsewhere in Uppsala he met famous peoples and read books about and by them. One of them was, by the way, the world-famous Swedish archbishop Nathan Söderblom. He was fostered in a warm Christian religiosity and learned to respect all kind of human life and nature as well. At an early age he got the opportunities to travel and see other countries. He grew up in an intellectual, literary tradition and environment. In his family, it was more or less expected that he made his career as a senior official in a responsible post in Sweden or abroad, as other members of his family had done before him.

It can also be said that the young Dag Hammarskjöld unintentionally got a training in what could be called "family diplomacy". First and foremost his mother but also his brother Sten, sometimes even his father, turned to him with confidences when there were tensions within the family which Dag evidently in a gentle way attempted to bridge over. He

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learned to listen but also to keep what he had heard to himself. I have seen no examples where he takes sides for or against anyone in the family, perhaps an early indication in the direction of his skills in "silent diplomacy".

More could be said about all his prerequisites for an international mission to promote peace. However, in my opinion there are, hopefully, satisfactory indications available to find a positive answer of the question of the headline. Dag Hammarskjöld, consciously or not, was indeed fostered to internationalism and peace.

Notes and References

1.
Well-known biographies are for example:
Lash, Joseph P. *Dag Hammarskjold: Custodian of the brushfire peace.* (New York: Doubleday, 1961.)
Kelen, Emery. *Hammarskjöld.* (New York: G. P. Putman's Sons, 1966.)
Van Dusen, Henry P. *Dag Hammarskjöld: The statesman and his faith.* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967.)
Urquhart, Brian. *Hammarskjold.* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972.)
To mention is, of course, Hammarskjöld's own *Markings,* from 1963 and later, in many editions and languages. For further information on printed materials a contact is redommended with UN Depository Library, Dag Hammarskjöldbiblioteket, Address: Östra Ågatan 27, S-753 22 Uppsala, Sweden, Tel 46-(0)18-18 33 50, Fax 46-(0)18-18 39 99.

2.
Among others Ambassador Per Lind and Professor Sture Linnér, Stockholm.

3.
Address of The Royal Library: Humlegården Box 5039, S-102 41 Stockholm. Tel 46-(0)8-463 40 00, Fax 46-(0)8-463 40 04.

4.
Birnbaum, Karl. *Den unge Dag Hammarskjölds inre värld – inblickar i en människas tillblivelse* [The young Dag Hammarskjöld's inner world – glimpses of the birth of a being]. (Dualis, 1998).

5.
All the letters are written in Swedish.

6.
The names of the friends were Gudmund Björck, Rutger Moll and Jan Waldenström. Of course, Dag Hammarskjöld also had other friends but it is with these ones he had the most regular and frequent contact and

correspondence. Letters from Hammarskjöld to Björck are deposited at the University Library in Uppsala, The collection of Gudmund Björck. Letters from Hammarskjöld to Waldenström are in private possession but have partly been available for me through Birnbaum's essay – see note 4 above.

Some Notes on the Author

Bengt Thelin, Ph.D. and L.Th., started his career as a teacher of History and Religious Education at the upper secondary school level. In 1965 he took over an administrative position at the Teacher Training College in Uppsala. From 1969 to 1989 he held a position as Director of Education at the Swedish National Board of Education. He has been charged by different commissions at The Council of Europe, Unesco and the International Baccalaureate Organization in Genève. As retired he is occupied by history research and free-lancing for some Swedish newspapers.

"Peace Education Miniprints" are published and distributed by the R&D Group "Preparedness for Peace" (address: School of Education, Box 23501, S-200 45 Malmö, Sweden).

ISSN 1101-6418

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